

2004

THE JEFFERSON LECTURE

On May 6, 2004, poetry critic Helen Vendler delivered the thirty-third annual Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC. In her lecture, “The Ocean, the Bird, and the Scholar,” Vendler looked toward the future of the humanities with the arts playing a central role.

Vendler challenged the notion of art disciplines as secondary to history and philosophy within the humanities, noting that “it is by their arts that cultures are principally remembered. For every person who has read a Platonic dialog, there are probably ten who have seen a Greek marble in a museum.” Understanding the arts, Vendler proposed, provides context for gaining a deeper understanding of other humanities disciplines.



Helen Vendler

PHOTO: MARK MORELLI

“The arts bring into play historical and philosophical questions without implying the prevalence of a single system or of universal solutions,” Vendler said. “Artworks embody the individuality that fades into insignificance in the massive canvas of history and is suppressed in philosophy by the desire for impersonal assertion. The arts are true to the way we actually live and have lived—as singular persons swept by drive and affections, not as collective entities or sociological paradigms.”

Vendler also spoke on the importance of critics and scholars of the arts. Through the poetry of Wallace Stevens, she explored the necessity of not only creating and enjoying art but also studying it.

“The arts and the studies of the arts are for Stevens a symbiotic pair, each dependent on each other,” said Vendler. “Nobody is born understanding string quartets or reading Latin or creating poems; without the scholar and his libraries, there would be no perpetuation and transmission of culture. The mutual support of art and learning, the mutual delight each ideally takes in each, can be taken as a paradigm of how the humanities might be integrally conceived and educationally conveyed as inextricably linked to the arts.”

Vendler has published numerous books of literary criticism, essays, and reviews of poetry. After graduating summa cum laude from Emmanuel University in Raleigh, North Carolina, Vendler studied at the University of Louvain in Belgium as a Fulbright Scholar. She returned to the United States to pursue her PhD in

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English, first spending a year as a special student at Boston University before being admitted to the Harvard English Department. There, she wrote her dissertation on W.B. Yeats, which became her first book. Vendler says of Yeats, “Once you encounter him he makes an enormous impact. When I found him lurking there for me between Tennyson and Eliot, I couldn’t believe that there was someone there I hadn’t known about.”

Vendler has since written many works of literary criticism, including *The Poetry of George Herbert*, *The Odes of John Keats*, *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire*, *The Given and the Made*, *The Breaking of Style*, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, *Seamus Heaney*, *Coming of Age as a Poet*, and *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens’ Longer Poems*, which won the James Russell Lowell Prize of the Modern Language Association. Her three-volume collection of essays, *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, received the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism. Poet Seamus Heaney remarked that Vendler’s criticism “is like a receiving station picking up on each poem, unscrambling things out of word-waves, making sense of it and making sure of it. She can second-guess the sixth sense of the poem.”

Vendler has taught at Cornell, Swarthmore, Haverford, Smith, and Boston University. She currently teaches at Harvard University, where she is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor. She is the first woman to achieve the rank of University Professor at Harvard. Vendler often lectures at the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo, Ireland.

The Jefferson Lecture is the highest honor the federal government bestows for achievement in the humanities. It was established in 1972 and carries a \$10,000 stipend.